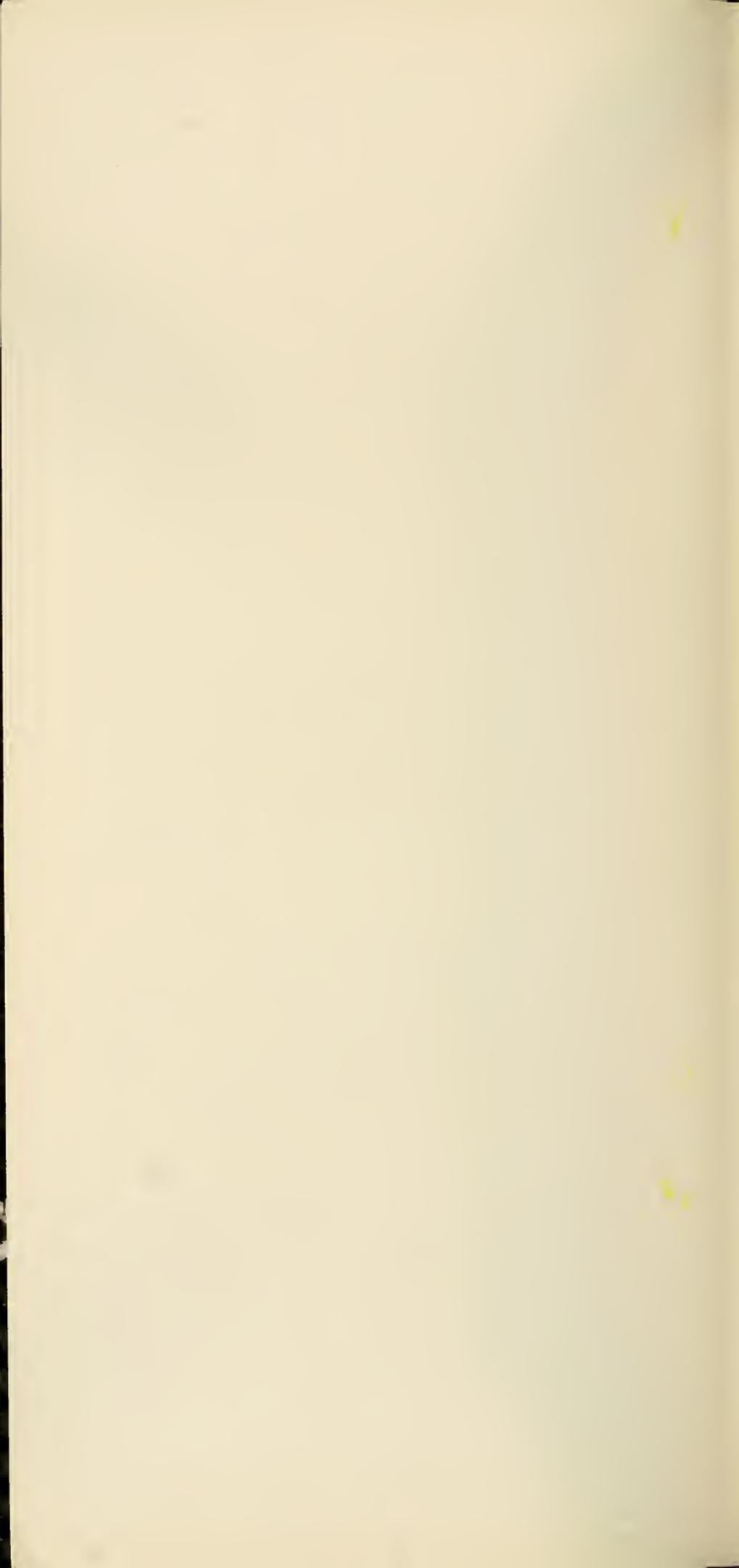




# ■ VAN GOGH AND EXPRESSIONISM ■







VAN GOGH  
AND  
EXPRESSIONISM

MAURICE TUCHMAN

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*Van Gogh and Expressionism* was prepared by Maurice Tuchman, Research Fellow and Lecturer at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. It follows a similar commentary on *Cézanne and Structure in Modern Painting* published by the Museum a year ago.

In both instances it was our intention to make obvious points. We wished to reiterate that the most consistent and conspicuous forms of Cézanne later found expression in the styles of Cubism, Neo-Plasticism and Suprematism, the Bauhaus and the geometric modes of contemporary painting. Similarly, we mean to stress in the current exhibition and the accompanying commentary that the opposite, clearly identifiable aspect of Van Gogh's style—one transforming emotion through expressive color and gesture—is embodied in Fauvism, Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism.

To be sure, Cézanne is progenitor of more than one tradition and it must be well understood that his structural attainment is a springboard to his expressive powers. Similarly, Van Gogh's expressive intensity is entirely compatible with, indeed dependent on, the artist's profound concern with formal pursuits.

Conceptual art categories, although to some degree arbitrary, may nevertheless be useful for purposes of initial orientation. Such a theme as the current exhibition offers is meant to function as a temporary scaffolding to be discarded when the principal structure has come to rest on its own foundations.

Thomas M. Messer, Director

# INTRODUCTION

In expressionism, the image of the perceived world is pervasively transformed by emotion rather than by an objective or idealizing concept. The expressionist artist imaginatively projects his own feelings into other beings and objects—even, in certain cases, into non-representational forms. Older artists—Grünewald in the 15th century and El Greco in the 16th, for example—infused religious themes with intense emotion. The painful deformations and lacerated flesh of Grünewald's Christ reflect the German painter's identification with His suffering. Similarly, El Greco's saints are etherealized into flame-like rhythms expressing the artist's ecstatic and mystical spirituality. Beginning with Goya and Van Gogh and continuing through the abstract expressionists, modern expressionist art has tended to discard intrinsically emotional subjects, such as climactic religious episodes, in favor of subjects drawn from everyday life. By exaggerating, simplifying and freely distorting forms, the modern artist's "self" may be projected into a pair of worn boots (Van Gogh), a hanging dead rooster (Soutine) or the portrayal of ordinary individuals (Rouault, Kokoschka).

Common to the many expressionist styles, abstract as well as representational, is the element of directness, which Van Gogh first recognized when he declared "there is something good in every direct action." From Van Gogh to the painters of today, the individual brushstroke—the unique touch of the painter's hand—has been the crucial component in the expressiveness of the complete picture.

The expressionist stroke is loaded, highly charged and self-conscious. It implies the gesture of the artist in the painting act—a gesture of body movement, not merely the motion of the wrist, as in impressionism. The expressionist painter's touch contains in embryo the qualities of his larger expression: it is one of the miracles of art that a mere mark can be so evocative of feeling and sensibility. Thus Van Gogh's stroke seems to burn into canvas with savage but deliberate forcefulness:

Rouault's characteristic stroke is like a flagellant's blow, ecstatic and unconstrained; Soutine's stroke is never a line but a fleshy patch, a section of sentient visceral matter; Kokoschka's mark is a seismographic quiver, an exquisitely sensitive emotional vehicle; Kandinsky's touch may be dainty or aggressively crude, it may be thin and spindly or dangerously explosive, but it is always in unpredictable dynamic flux; de Kooning's emphatic mark piles one potent charge of paint upon another, implying a constantly self-generating process.

These characteristics of the stroke are tied to the sense of urgency in expressionist art, the need to communicate vital emotional experiences to others. The very quality of haste or speed in the creation of the picture, which is often due to the feverish rapidity of the execution, is transmitted to the viewer. In expressionism, surface and image qualities are more important than compositional qualities. Spatial ambiguities and certain kinds of formal ambiguities—for example, a distant mountain appearing close to the viewer, or a vase seen simultaneously from different viewpoints—which were vital to Cézanne and the cubists, are avoided in expressionism. Forms are reduced, simplified and concentrated to facilitate the transmission of the message. It is significant that a key influence upon many expressionists was the 15th century woodcut, whose rugged and unequivocal style permitted its wide dissemination among the people. Primitive art, displaying similar virtues of bold simplicity, exerted an equally powerful attraction upon the expressionists.

The expressionists, like many modern artists, have painted in bold and pure colors, but they have been especially intrigued by the emotive possibilities of discordance and blunt contradiction. Van Gogh first perceived such color possibilities when he declared his wish “to express the love of two lovers by the marriage of two complementaries, their blending and their oppositions.” Later artists have extended the possibilities of color clash, applying pigments straight from the tube (“like sticks of dynamite” as Vlaminck said), or by placing opposing shades of full saturation side by side, and even abandoning tones altogether and intermingling vast sections of black and white. The expressionists have applied impasto freely in the service of color intensification, gleaning rich chromatic effects from the density of pigment.

# VAN GOGH

"My great longing is to learn to make incorrectness... more true than the literal truth," wrote Vincent Van Gogh. In his first masterpiece, *The Potato Eaters*, Van Gogh strove to convey the clumsy honesty and naïve strength of peasantry by rude and frankly unsophisticated means. Figures were awkwardly placed or obscured, their anatomies deformed, their gestures exaggerated. Not unexpectedly, he was denounced for these distortions of natural form. "Dare you," exclaimed his friend, the painter Van Rappard, "working in such a manner, invoke the names of [the peasant painters] Millet and Breton? Come! Art stands in my opinion too high to be treated so carelessly." Van Gogh responded. "I want to paint what I feel and feel what I paint"—without regard, he added, to what "civilized" people might think or say.

To attain original expressiveness, Van Gogh first adopted a completely non-emotional manner. He broke with the dark Millet-like modeling of *The Potato Eaters* and yielded to impressionism. In Paris in 1886 he painted 200 canvases in which brief delicate strokes carry airy tones. Impressionism liberated Van Gogh's responsiveness to the outdoor world, to the bright sun and vital multiplicity of things on earth. Japanese art also affected him, encouraging Van Gogh to contrast pure colors (including black and white) and draw precisely contoured flat shapes. Then, in 1888, in Arles, he discarded the manner of impressionism, but retained its lessons—of luminosity and directness—and discovered a new art.

Van Gogh's paintings at Arles are the first intensely bright pictures in modern art. In describing his working method, Van Gogh said he "exaggerated" the perceived tone of an object: as with "incorrect" drawing, so with unnaturally heightened colors he aimed at a higher—a more personal—truth. Color was the supreme modern quality to Van Gogh. He believed that the art of the future would be portraiture and believed it would have to be rejuvenated through color which could "express and exalt character." Van Gogh recognized the

pure evocative power of color, in his words, "color expresses something by itself." Color was related in his mind to poetry and to music: "one can express poetry by nothing but arranging colors well, just as one can say consoling things in music." He pointed to examples in his own work in which colors were meant to express states of mind, or passionate feelings, or abstract ideas. "Thought," "love," the "terrible passions of humanity," "hope"—Van Gogh believed all these could be suggested by combinations of tones.

In Van Gogh's new style of Arles, vivid tones fill entire canvases, without shadows or dark relieving areas. *The Sunflowers*, for example, is virtually all yellow, with more or less bright surfaces according to the object described, whether petals, vase, table or background. Such a composition is based on shades of similar hue. In others, such as the famous *Night Café*, a fully saturated color clashes with equally intense opposing colors: yellow appears beside red and green. The different approach—modulation or bold contrast—is tied to the meaning of each picture: nervous strain and disturbance is the theme of the *Night Café*, whereas the intention of the *Sunflowers* was to soothe the viewer.

At Saint-Rémy, beginning in May, 1889, Van Gogh's palette becomes more restrained, with cooler and more mixed tones. These are arranged in small variegated areas rather than large flat patterns. Forms become more agitated and energetic in Saint-Rémy paintings: Van Gogh projects his emotional experience into linear rhythms instead of color contrasts. In the last phase of his art, Van Gogh often sought to fuse the ample form of Arles with the spontaneous rhythms of Saint-Rémy.

The *Mountains at Saint-Rémy*, painted in July, 1889, is a masterwork of Saint-Rémy style and of expressionist method. The large central region of the picture, comprised of mountains and trees, is the most compelling area. In the mountain range convoluted rhythms cascade over each other with seeming abandon. Each curved stroke leads to the next in a torrential flow. Each mark is a visual problem encountered and solved, then leading, in turn, to another problem.

The task in this kind of spontaneous painting is to maintain subtlety and inventiveness throughout the pressing haste of the painting act. Van Gogh was aware of these opposing demands when he compared his manner of working to that

of "an actor on a stage...[who] has to think of a thousand things at one time in a single half-hour." Even when he painted in a "feverish condition," as he put it, Van Gogh wished it understood that he "was in the midst of complicated calculation."

We can see how certain areas express both immediacy and subtle complexity. Beginning high at the left canvas edge, the contour of a hill plunges diagonally to earth in the center. The descent is swift and unbroken, pressing as lava flow, yet the rhythm is composed of skillfully varied curves, no one of which is repeated. Furthermore, the individual curves become increasingly broad as they descend — a play on perspective schemes where largeness suggests proximity and smallness evokes distance. Here the mountain does not approach the viewer so much as fall from left to right in a single plane parallel to the picture surface. The mountain at the right offers another example of the fusion of impulse with invention. It is spread out before the viewer at its base and then ascends pyramidal to its apex. The mountain is a seething mass of energy. Hard stone is here transformed into a fluid substance. Forms coil, overlap and fuse in unpredictable ways. Certain tonal pairings—an orange beside a blue, a green beside a yellow—add a discordant note. Yet, as we gaze at this emotion-distorted mountain, we perceive many configurations of order and control. The small form at the apex, shaped like a head and shoulders, is repeated many times, in varying positions and sizes, throughout the body of the mountain—for example, the blue and black outlined shape directly above the tallest tree. Certain lines traverse the entire breadth of the mountain, bringing continuity to the jig-saw pattern: near the top of the mountain a black diagonal slices through the coiling lines. Also, as forms ascend and recede they become smaller; in corresponding fashion, the tones are contrasted less and become muted as they rise and recede.

Contrast to the agitation of the mountainous region is provided by the flanking areas of sky and earth, each painted in a uniform and low-keyed manner. The small house, peacefully nestled beneath the avalanche of forms, is also an element of contrast. And the spray of flowers, a brilliant explosive burst of pure colors, further opposes the sweeping linearity of the mountains.



**VINCENT VAN GOGH**

MOUNTAINS AT SAINT-RÉMY. 1889. Oil on canvas, 29 x 37".

Collection Thannhauser Foundation, Inc., New York.

# MUNCH

Edvard Munch's art exerted a powerful influence on German expressionist painters. Munch invented a wide range of emotional subjects pertaining to modern life, certain of which were eagerly adopted by the German artists. His presentations of night street scenes, for example, provided the subject and theme for some of Kirchner's most effective works. His vigorous portrait style also provided a model for many of the later artists.

At a time when all original artists were purging their subject matter of literary content, Munch proposed a frankly psychological art, rooted in literary themes. The themes of his art—the isolation of an individual in a group, love-hate feelings toward women, obsessive doubts about identity—were related to those in contemporary Scandinavian drama and literature. Munch, born in 1863, spent his artistically formative years in Oslo's bohemian and intellectual society of the 1880s. In a land all but untouched by the crises and controversies that marked 19th century continental life, debates on moral, social and artistic questions were raised by rebellious literary figures, Ibsen, Bjørnson and others. Munch's peers, representing a younger generation than these veterans, took more radical positions than they, urging anarchism and the destruction of conventional restraints on individual behavior. Munch's friend, Hans Jaeger, was fined and jailed for publishing an autobiographical novel containing descriptions of sexual experiences. At this early moment in his own development, Munch's concern with erotic and sexual subjects commenced. The theme of puberty, for example, was first painted in 1886, although the famous version of it was made in the Nineties. Munch's expressionistic production continued until 1908, when he suffered a nervous breakdown.

Until that time, Munch's paintings had been about alienation. In his view, communication between the sexes or

between an individual and society is impossible. In dozens of paintings and graphic works, Munch expressed his conviction that women are unattainable and dangerous. There are three types of women, corresponding to three chronological stages: youth presents the idealized and innocent aspect of woman, but this type is self-absorbed and therefore unattainable; in maturity, woman is the voluptuary, unabashedly physical but grasping and voracious; in old age, the woman offers succor and relief to man, but only as an accompaniment to death. In Munch's bitter presentations, the three types appear singly or together, and always are a menace.

Man's inevitable separation from woman is matched, in Munch's art, by man's hopeless estrangement from society. Munch's vision of this condition, expressed repeatedly throughout the Nineties and until 1908, is of frozen immobile figures, correctly, even formally, dressed, staring bleakly at the viewer. Munch titled these scenes of lonely crowds *Anxiety*. In later and more gentle versions, figures appear beside each other and stare off into the distance, or as in the painting opposite the following page, of 1905, a group of girls stand huddled together in a circle.

After his breakdown in 1908, and until his death at 80 in 1944, the artist exorcized morbid and depressing subjects from his work, replacing them with presentations of workers and common people, with landscapes and allegorical themes.

Thus far, we have discussed Munch's subject matter. But, like most important artists in history, he was also a formal innovator, bringing a new compression and reductive simplicity to the handling of pictorial elements. The shape and emotional meaning of a figure is determined by its gesture. The gesture is the figure's essential aspect—this is true even when it is not a motion-filled gesture. To render it most expressively, Munch eliminates all distracting detail and greatly exaggerates and simplifies the important rhythms. In the famous *Shriek*, for example, the shouting figure is transformed into a single tremulous rhythm, a rhythm based on the motion of seizing the head with the arms. The swaying curves of the figure are repeated throughout the picture, in the large areas of sea, mountain and sky. Thus, the most important form, simplified and subjectivized, contains in embryo the prevailing pictorial qualities found in the rest of the work.

In the 1890s Munch (along with Gauguin and Vallotton, all of whom worked independently) revived the woodcut as an expressive medium. This medium had fallen into misuse in the 16th century when it began to serve merely as a reproductive tool. The woodblock was drawn upon (and then incised) rather than directly cut into. Munch's achievement lay in directly scoring the woodblock surface with varied and forceful marks—completely unrelated in their quality to drawn lines. (Munch also harnessed the textural qualities of the wood in the printing process.) In Van Gogh's drawing technique there is an anticipation of this graphic directness. The paper surface of his pen and ink sketches at Arles is stroked and stabbed by quick pen thrusts, as if the pen itself were being tried as an expressive instrument.

The *Girls on a Bridge* is gentle and restrained compared to most expressionist paintings. An air of great solemnity prevails. Yet there is a hint of menace in the creeping green foliage which threatens to envelop the house at the center. The sad, perhaps furtive gathering of the girls similarly augurs trouble.

The arrangement of the forms in the picture implies greater tension than is first apparent. Large, ample rhythms describe the trees while crisp angular lines describe the houses. Above all the plunging strokes of the bridge contrast with the relaxed rhythms found elsewhere.

The bridge springs from the left, where a railing bisects the picture corner, to the center where the bridge flows into a road in an uninterrupted rhythm, which swiftly diminishes as it recedes. Munch turns perspective—which for centuries had served art merely as an aid to representation or had been ignored altogether—to expressive use. Munch, like Van Gogh, uses perspective to suggest emotion. His perspective schemes evoke the anguish of human separateness.

The major forms in the picture, the houses, the trees and figure-group, exhibit a similar sense of closure and seclusion. The houses have small windows and no doors, and no light penetrates the dense foliage of the trees. The group of figures has, literally, turned its back on the outside world. A yellow-ochre outline, seen clearly along the right edge of the girl at the right and beneath the pairs of shoes, further enfolds the group and binds it tightly together.



**EDVARD MUNCH**

GIRLS ON A BRIDGE. 1902. Oil on canvas,  $39\frac{1}{4} \times 39\frac{1}{2}$ ".

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Norton Simon, Los Angeles.

# ROUAULT

The French fauvist movement was precisely contemporaneous with the first German expressionist movement, *Die Brücke*. The aggressive and subjective character of paintings by Matisse, Vlaminck, Derain, and the other fauves (in works between 1905 and 1907) caused this art to be called expressionism, in contrast to impressionism. In fact, the term expressionism was applied to fauvism before modern German art became so labeled. Fauvism, like the German painting, was an art of bright color, animated brushstroke and free alteration of natural forms. French art of this period had no affinity, however, with the prevailing sense of anxiety and the brooding pessimism of contemporary German production. Nor did the fauvist artists stress discordant and disturbing color contrasts, or nervous linear rhythms, as did the *Brücke* group.

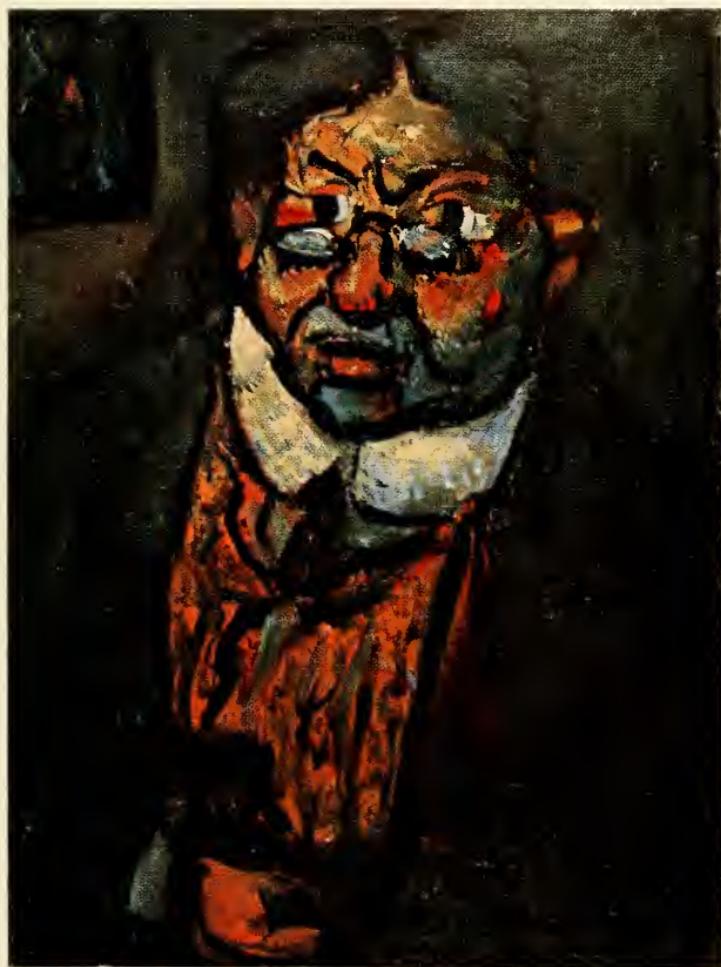
"A special kind of fauve" was the description given of Georges Rouault by a critic of the period. Although Rouault exhibited beside the fauves in 1905, and shared with them an ardent desire for spontaneous, even violent expression, he was closer in most respects to the German expressionists. Rouault's subjects were depressing, his figures were deformed and misshapen; his tones were almost impenetrably dark. Like the Germans' art, Rouault's paintings were acts of moral protest. But while German themes were concerned with the individual's relation to society (the destructive effects of society were stressed) Rouault's sole concern was the relationship of man to God.

Rouault was born in 1871 in Paris. His father, a cabinetmaker at the Pleyel piano factory, apprenticed him to a stained-glass maker, and then to a restorer of stained-glass windows: these experiences convinced Rouault that one could "start out as an artisan and develop into a sensitive artist, step by step, without taking oneself for a born classic or a genius." At twenty he entered Gustave Moreau's studio at the École des Beaux-Arts, studying with this romantic academician for eight years. During these years Rouault painted biblical and religious themes in a manner affected by Rembrandt as well as his master Moreau. Then, around 1903, Rouault absorbed the profound influence of the Catholic writer Léon Bloy. Bloy insisted on the most intense suffering as expiation for sin. Recognizing no gradations between good and evil, Bloy reserved his greatest scorn for the safe, petty bourgeois, "that soft and sticky monster equally incapable of the abominations of vice and the abominations of virtue." Rouault, a born Catholic, was deeply drawn to this obsessed and vehement man and in 1903 Rouault's style began to take on the savage apocalyptic force of Bloy's fanaticism. Interestingly enough, the artist—now deeply infused by religious sentiment—eliminated religious subjects from his paintings, save for a few heads of the suffering Christ. (Later, about 1918, when the force of Rouault's expressionism abated, religious and biblical subjects were reintroduced.) Instead, Rouault turned to modern life, finding in certain contemporary subjects—actually in a narrow range of figure types—vivid examples of the moral decay which in Rouault's view must attend the absence of belief. Prostitutes are brutally compressed into bulbous shapes, their resplendent blue-white bodies the incarnation of mortal sin. Their faces, contorted into an eternal grimace, are the analogues of their mutilated anatomies. Yet one never doubts Rouault's sincere compassion. As contrasted with Toulouse-Lautrec's presentation of prostitutes, in which sarcasm is blended with prurience, Rouault genuinely weeps for these suffering women.

Then there are circus performers, clowns, jugglers, wrestlers, rendered with ferocity but with more than a trace of admiration. He wrote of his envy for those "strolling players, drifting from North to South, from East to West, fun-loving, peace-making conquerors."

Both performers and prostitutes, marginal people in his society, earned a measure of sympathy from Rouault. The bourgeoisie, however, receives the deepest reproach. Judges are transformed into hideous bloated monsters, mute and cruel perverters of the justice they allegedly serve. "Mr. X." portrayed in the picture opposite, is "blamed" (to quote Rouault's interpretation of Daumier's attitude, an interpretation which describes Rouault's own feelings as well) "for his priggish conviction that he makes the world go round and secures our well-being by looking after his own...under a cloak of priest-like candor, he presumes to judge us all."

Rouault passed off the *Portrait of Mr. X.* of 1911 as a portrayal of a real man, until, several decades after it was painted, he admitted it was imaginary, a synthesis of his feelings about the petty bourgeoisie. This is surprising, for the portrait has that sense of direct confrontation found in genuine and truly incisive portraiture. Rouault here fuses the real and the fantastic: he creates "a credible form of the monstrous," as Baudelaire said of Goya. In making dark paintings Rouault rejected a prevalent tendency in avant-garde French painting of the 19th century to ever-brighter, more luminous canvases. In this respect also, Rouault's art recalls Goya's, especially the Spanish master's "black paintings" of the early 19th century. But Rouault's grotesque personages are authentic 20th century creations, and several formal features testify to their modernity. In *Mr. X.*, as in all Rouault's work in this period, the human form is brought extremely close-up, it is flattened, made frontal and disposed in a narrow space. The form is compressed and simplified; it seems to bulge and expand on the canvas surface. The form of a single figure so crowds the surface it is cut by the picture edge. Rouault's many versions of three judges, which similarly thrust at the viewer while they spread at the sides, closely resemble Nolde's paintings of New Guinea savages (painted about this same time, between 1907 and 1913) in terms of this formal—purely modern—presentation.



**GEORGES ROUAULT**

PORTRAIT OF MR. X. 1911. Oil on paper, 30 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".

Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo. Edmund Hayes Fund.

# KANDINSKY

Vasily Kandinsky is the foremost pioneer of abstract art, art devoid of imitative forms. Other artists working independently, such as Kupka, Picabia, and Delaunay made non-representational paintings at about the same time. Unlike these artists, however, Kandinsky produced a spontaneous and highly expressive style, far removed from the structural or symbolic content of a Kupka or a Delaunay. In paintings beginning around 1910 Kandinsky strove to express his feelings on canvas without reference to obvious natural appearances. As early as 1920 his paintings of the previous decade were labeled "abstract expressionism," and this term is still applied to that period of his art. It describes Kandinsky's attempt to approximate the *rhythms* of nature without imitating the objects of nature. This type of abstraction contrasts with "pure" abstract art, which—as practiced later by Kandinsky himself and others—offers a configuration of forms which are often geometrical rather than organic and which do not spring from the artist's emotional life or relate to ordinary visual appearance.

Born in 1866 in Moscow, Kandinsky first decided to become a painter at the age of 30, after extensive training in law and political economy. Kandinsky came to Germany in 1896 as an art student and resided there until World War I forced his return to Moscow. In 1911, Kandinsky founded with Franz Marc the *Blaue Reiter* — a revolutionary group that urged artists to project their "spirituality" and "inner desires" onto canvas. According to Kandinsky, the picture need not be abstract—success depends solely on "how far the artist is able to carry his emotion." The "immense need," he said, was "cultivating" this emotion. Nevertheless, Kandinsky had come to believe that the appearance of natural objects in a painting detracted from the direct esthetic response to the painting. One's experience of the sensations evoked by shapes

and lines and colors, potentially a rich and satisfying experience, was obstructed by recognizing objects which provoke irrelevant associations.

Kandinsky had his first doubts about the necessity of the “object” fifteen years before he actually made a non-representational painting. In 1895—before he became a painter—he saw Monet’s haystacks and perceived the picture as a pure color harmony, failing at first to recognize in it the existence of objects. Years later a similar experience with a painting deepened his feeling that representational forms were inessential and probably harmful. In 1908, in his studio, he was “suddenly confronted by a picture of indescribable and incandescent loveliness.” Kandinsky goes on to say, “The painting lacked all subject, depicted no identifiable object, and was entirely composed of bright color patches. Finally, I approached closer and, only then, recognized it for what it really was—my own painting, standing on its side.” Convinced now that the depiction of objects should be eliminated altogether, Kandinsky still could not take the final step. He feared making works which were “mere geometric decoration...like a necktie or a carpet.” To search for “beauty of form and color by itself” was not enough. Rather, the artist must express his innermost emotion, his spirituality. In 1908 Kandinsky felt too isolated and too spiritually weak to be capable of infusing abstraction with emotion. In the course of the next few years, however, encouraged by fellow artists and the art historian Worringer, and heartened by the conviction that science would soon corroborate his ultimate intention (“the dissolution of matter is imminent,” he said) Kandinsky gradually excised representation from his art.

As representational motives decline, individual painted marks become increasingly animated. These distinctive marks testify to Kandinsky’s assertion of the independence of pictorial elements. They form a wealth of irregular shapes. Bright sparkling tones—sometimes attached to the contours of a shape, sometimes separated and free—may flare shrilly or resonate quietly. A thin line slicing through space will take on body and rear up, then dwindle and vanish. An exciting air of fresh discovery is imparted to the entire canvas.

There is a sense of new birth in each picture, and this also results from the process in Kandinsky’s art whereby

forms become intensified as their representative function is destroyed. Kandinsky explained this process:

A significantly acting objective destruction is in such a way also a complete song of praise, a singular sound, which resounds like a hymn of new revival, which does follow every ruination.<sup>1</sup>

In *Improvisation 28*, of 1912, reproduced opposite, the dissolution and consequent intensification of forms is found in many areas: in the reminiscence of mountains at the high left, the clump of trees beneath the mountain, and the castle at the upper right—the shape of which is repeated in two parallel elongated forms which traverse the height of the canvas. This picture, like most of Kandinsky's abstract expressionist canvases, is not, evidently, as "abstract" as one might at first suppose. Indeed, there are many other derivations from natural forms in these paintings. Another, particularly interesting derivation is the horse and rider at the middle right: the rearing horse, seen from behind, is indicated by a few sketchy lines of mane and by longer, dynamic swirls of neck, back and rear leg: astride it, the rider's head and legs are summarily marked. The theme of horse and rider was perhaps the most meaningful figurative theme to Kandinsky. It appears in his work between 1903, about the time Kandinsky was commencing original work, and 1913, when he reached a culminating point of his abstract expressionism. At first, the horse and rider, each naturally proportioned and moving in unison at a leisurely pace, symbolize a desired harmony and equilibrium between reason and passion, intellect and emotion. As Kandinsky's art develops toward the emotional and spiritual, the configuration of horse and rider changes. In 1908, a key year, the horse begins to rear up and take the lead: by 1911 and 1912, the horse, now over-sized, races forward, his surging power barely restrained by the rider. Kandinsky's style of expression, as we see, echoes the importance given to passion and emotion. Dissolution accompanies intensification: this process, then, is found in the evolution of a theme, as well as in the specific presentation of a subject in a single picture. The pictorial vestige of horse-and-rider seen opposite is a concentrated and energetic near-abstraction; in subsequent paintings all traces of its origin will vanish, and only its force will remain.

<sup>1</sup>Quoted by Kenneth C. Lindsay in "Kandinsky in 1914 New York: Solving a Riddle," *Art News*, vol. 55, no. 3, May 1956, p. 59.



**VASILY KANDINSKY**

NO. 160b (IMPROVISATION 28). 1912. Oil on canvas, 44 x 63 $\frac{3}{4}$ ".

Collection The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

# KOKOSCHKA

Oskar Kokoschka carried the expressionist quest for immediacy into the realm of portraiture. In his early period between 1907—when he was only 22—and 1914, Kokoschka produced a series of powerful portraits of the Viennese and German intelligentsia and wealthy classes. These are the most psychologically incisive of modern portraits, essentially expressionist in their avowed objective. Each portrait presents a direct emotional confrontation between painter and sitter. The artist's feelings about the model, generally of an aggressive and morbid nature, are grafted onto the model's features. Nevertheless, a physiognomic likeness is maintained, reflecting Kokoschka's search for the true individual.

In older portraiture, which was usually commissioned, the artist adopted a subservient stance: the model's nobility or beauty or power had to be stressed—or, if need be, invented. If the artist wished to express negative or mixed feelings about the sitter, he had to be courageous and adept in doing so. Goya's court portraiture is the outstanding example of a savage indictment being accepted, even embraced by the insulted party.

In the 19th century, the artist began to make portraits of individuals chosen freely from his acquaintances. The modern portrait was invented late in the century by Van Gogh. In Van Gogh's fresh conception, the eccentricity and irregularity of features, rather than their harmonious disposition, was emphasized. Van Gogh sought the human in the peculiarly individual. He eliminated modeling in light and dark, and surrounded the face with unnaturally bright colors.

Of all the artists of the next generation, both in France and the Germanic nations, who were affected by Van Gogh's art, Kokoschka best understood the nature of Van Gogh's portraiture. His first portraits, with their thickly painted surfaces divided into broad simplified forms, come directly out of Van Gogh. Then, almost immediately, Kokoschka shed Van Gogh's formal devices, but retained the idea that insightful portrayal depended on capturing marginal aspects of physiognomy. Paint is applied thinly, like watercolor, and a highly activated line connects patches of colors. Van Gogh had hoped his portraits would look like "apparitions" in the future; Kokoschka seized upon this latent aspect of his work and created hallucinatory and demoniac creatures. His portraits of Austrian writers and artists project a certain physical and spiritual decadence. These are related to Kokoschka's fascination with illness and disease—at one time he painted tuberculosis victims in a Swiss sanatorium. Kokoschka aims to expose mental suffering in these "black portraits," as he called them.

While Van Gogh's sitters are generally stationary and quite obviously posing, Kokoschka's are seized, as if unaware, in motion. They are caught talking, usually gesticulating. Or they have become lost in themselves and have drifted into fantasy life. Their gestures and expressions are rendered with agitated lines, tense sensitive flicks and jabs of the brush. In certain portraits, forms are flattened, thinly stretched out on the canvas surface. In others, however—and contrary to most modern practice—Kokoschka models a form, a face and hands, not in terms of light and dark, but by variously weighted lines, so that they suggest protrusions and recessions, proximity and distance, and also the texture of a shape—a bony knuckle, a wisp of hair, an aged worn skin.

The artist's presence in each picture is asserted by the vivid alteration of natural forms and by the forcefulness of each stroke, which calls attention to itself as a singular creation of the artist. (In distorting a figure, or exaggerating physiognomic features, Kokoschka's delineation could descend into caricature—which simplifies to elucidate a single aspect of character—were it not for the rich complexity of the pictorial configuration substituted in its place.) In many pictures

Kokoschka introduces a specific imaginative device which also declares the painter's emotional involvement with the painted figure. In portrayals of the psychiatrist Forel, the art historians Professor Tietze and Mrs. Erika Tietze-Conrat, and other intellectuals, the painted surface is scratched upon with delicate marks, arranged as starbursts or crossed networks, or in a seemingly aimless and random fashion. They are like doodles, symbolizing the sitter's self-absorption, his mental preoccupation. These scrawls, which do not properly *belong* to the sitter, are also the artist's unique sign, reflecting his independent presence in the picture.

Between 1910 and 1915, Kokoschka's style, which had been essentially that of a draftsman, becomes freer and more painterly. Symbolic presentations also appear. Both features mark the *Knight Errant* of 1915, reproduced opposite. This was the last painting that Kokoschka made in Vienna before being called to military service. The artist imagines a dark battlefield, bare and desolate, upon which a wounded soldier lies. Dressed, ironically, in medieval armor, the soldier has toppled on his back, as helpless as an overturned insect. He bears the artist's own features. Shortly after this picture was made, the artist was wounded in battle, on the Galician front, and found himself in a similar, desperate situation.

The painting is unusual for Kokoschka for it is a product purely of the imagination, rather than an interpretation of reality. It is a sad, lyrical fantasy projected in strong expressionist terms. The night is illuminated by objects which possess a weird, inner luminosity. The metallic costume, the morose reclining woman and the wave-capped sea are rendered in charged whitish strokes, palpable, thick, rugged and energetic. The taut arrangement of these rhythms, no less than the strained, pathetic gesture of the soldier, conveys his fearful tension. A network of angular, intersecting lines clashes in turbulent action in the center of the picture. This vigorously painted area contrasts with the prevailing tone of quiet desperation.



**OSKAR KOKOSCHKA**

KNIGHT ERRANT. 1915. Oil on canvas, 35 3/8 x 70 7/8".

Collection The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

# NOLDE

By 1905, after a long period of study in Germany and a brief stay in Paris, Emil Nolde had developed a kind of energetic impressionism. Van Gogh's example had probably inspired him to adopt a vibrant palette and to paint with assertive strokes. In his search for a personal and emotional expression Nolde worked at this time in isolation, unaware that other German artists shared his beliefs. In fact, E. L. Kirchner, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Erich Heckel had just joined together to form the first modern German expressionist movement—*Die Brücke* (The Bridge). These artists lived and worked together (in a renovated butcher's shop in Dresden's working-class district), thus making a reality of Van Gogh's dream of an artists' community. The Brücke artists launched a revolution against the then prevailing and moribund style of German impressionism. In public manifestoes, in paintings and graphic media, they asserted the need for an emotional art, direct and forceful, like the art of Grünewald in Germany's golden age.

In 1906, the Brücke artists, who were in their early or mid-twenties, invited Nolde to join them. Although he was many years their senior, having been born in 1867, he eagerly embraced the cause. Nolde's association with the Brücke was as crucial as it was short-lived. It lasted less than two years but the enthusiasm and understanding of the younger men quickly fired Nolde, giving him confidence and fresh ideas. His production sharply increased and his style became more personal. After his formal break with the group, Nolde remained an expressionist, developing, indeed, in the following decade, into the chief exponent of German expressionism.

Like the younger men, Nolde was drawn to primitive art, but not, as most French artists were, for formal reasons (which spurred the invention of cubism). Nolde admired its

spirit, in his words, the "absolute originality, the intense frequently grotesque expression of strength and life in the simplest possible form"<sup>1</sup> he found in primitive art. Primitive man himself, encountered in the South Seas and among the peasantry of Russia and his own North German homeland, affected Nolde deeply, intensifying his own mystical propensities.

In Nolde's view, nature—elemental and supreme—nurtures man, while divorce from the soil destroys and deranges him. Many paintings made after his travels in Melanesia and Asia (in 1913-14) project his understanding and reverence of primitive man. His fascination with primitive people was equalled by his attraction, however horrified, to the ultra-sophisticated types of Berlin night life. Nolde wrote of the "revelers with corpse-like faces...feverish demimondaines in elegant evening gowns...the seamy side of life, with its rouge, its slippery mud and its degeneration."<sup>2</sup> He painted these impressions, as passionate condemnations, in the second decade of the century. These "degenerate" denizens of the city proved, to Nolde, the vital necessity of man's tie to nature. Nolde's "blood and soil" mystique was so pronounced he took the name of his native village as his own—he was born Emil Hansen. The mystical love of Teutonic soil led him to join the Nazi party.

Color was Nolde's chief means of expressing his mystical rootedness in the soil. He rhapsodically verbalized his appreciation of the power of color:

Colors, the materials of the painter: colors in their own lives, weeping and laughing, dream and bliss, hot and sacred, like love songs and the erotic, like songs and glorious chorals! Colors in vibration, pealing like silver bells and clanging like bronze bells, proclaiming happiness, passion and love, soul, blood and death.<sup>3</sup>

Nolde's color is, however, not as arbitrary as the color schemes of other advanced artists—French artists, primarily—who were working at this time. Nolde's color is essentially

<sup>1</sup>Quoted by Peter Selz in *German Expressionist Painting*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1957, p. 290.

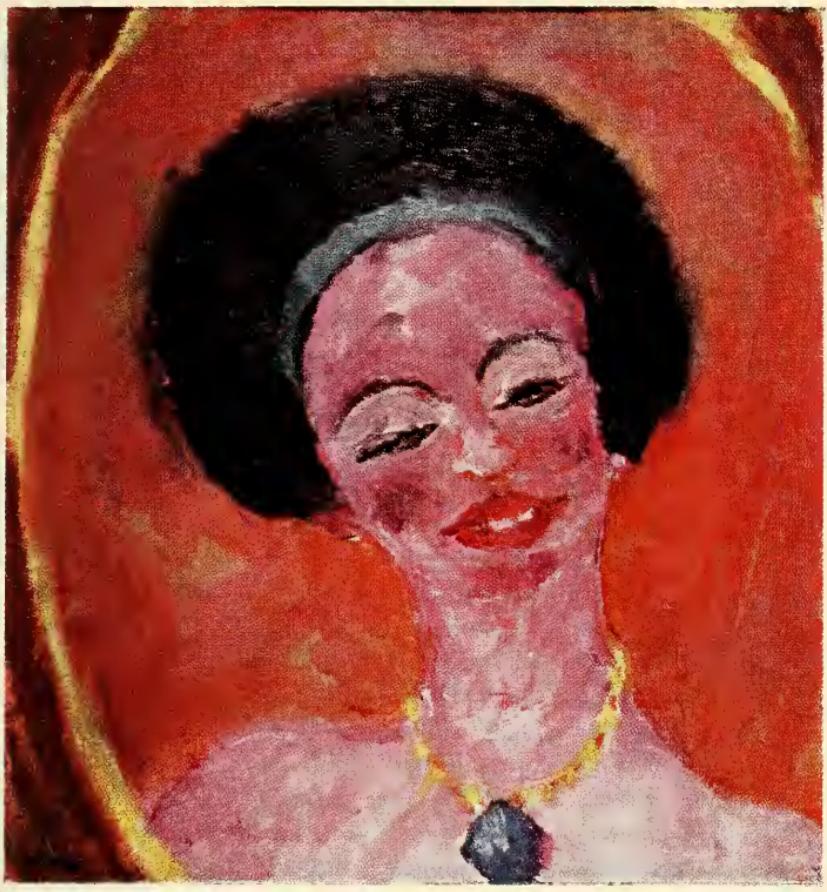
<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Werner Haftmann in *Emil Nolde*, New York. Abrams, 1959, p. 60.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted by Selz, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

*mimetic*—it generally imitates, in however intensified a fashion, color properties of the perceived object and scene. The fauves, on the contrary, offered a *metaphor* of perceived reality. Nolde's intention may be contrasted with that of Matisse. When the French artist painted an autumn landscape, he did "not try to remember what colors suit this season," but was inspired by the *sensation* that the season gave him. As he wrote, "the icy clearness of the sour blue sky will express the season just as well as the tonalities of the leaves." Nolde would have painted those seasonal tonalities—burnt yellows and rust oranges—associated with Fall, in exaggerated tones and in startling combinations. When Matisse painted a dionysiac dance his tones were cool blue and green; Nolde's colors, on the contrary, were those *suggested* by the scene—a barbaric dance under the hot sun prompted him to paint with "hot" yellows and oranges.

Nolde simplifies and condenses forms, eliminating from them finicky details which would detract from the glow and resonance of color. The forms are large and they crowd the surface, filling the canvas at all four sides, barely contained or at times actually cut off by the limits of the picture field. Individual objects are flattened and brought into a single narrow plane close to the picture surface. The large and simple shapes project a grave monumentality, enlivened by the snapshot immediacy of this close-up view. The *Mulatto*, painted in 1915, reproduced opposite, exemplifies these formal characteristics. Here, in presenting one large form, the head and shoulders of a Melanesian woman, perhaps a dancer, Nolde searches for expansive round rhythms to evoke the robust health and emotionalism of primitive life. Circles and semi-circles are shaped out of the face and eyebrows, the green hair ribbon and the large crown of hair, the necklace and the jewel. A great halo-like yellow arc embraces these smaller rhythms. (Only the upper part of this yellow arc is drawn: the necklace, also yellow, suggests the completion of the circle.)

Van Gogh had hoped to instill into his portraits "that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize" by "the actual radiance and vibrancy of coloring." Nolde, painting like Van Gogh in an almost religious spirit, employs a radiant palette and even paints the halo. The result is this glorious celebration of the pagan world.



**EMIL NOLDE**

THE MULATTO. 1915. Oil on canvas, 30½ x 28¾".

Collection Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

# SOUTINE

Like Van Gogh, Chaim Soutine made expressionist paintings in all the categories of art—landscape, portrait and still life. In each category he widened the formal and emotional possibilities of expressionism. To the landscape, Soutine, in works painted between 1919 and 1922, imparted a violent and cataclysmic power, a sense of constant change, of continual creation and destruction. Soutine's landscapes are not rational constructions, not the result of a desire to arrange nature and harmonize its parts, in the traditional conception of landscape painting. On the contrary, pictures such as the *Hill at Céret*, reproduced in this booklet, are passionate individual responses to the dynamic processes of nature. The artist identifies with diverse natural elements, with their growth and decay. He makes the mute existence of trees, rocks, or a cavity in the earth sentient, and the relationships between them emotionally charged.

Soutine's portraits rank with Kokoschka's as the most significant body of portrait paintings of this century. Compared with Kokoschka's psychologically incisive portraits, Soutine's are less probing, less concerned with analysis and characterization of personality. Soutine, however, did not wish to probe and expose the human soul or to reproduce too carefully the human exterior on canvas. Soutine attempted to form new living creatures, additions to the world of nature. These are often demoniac and anguished, always possessed of a palpable substance and a rich sensibility. They are creatures born of the most extraordinary deformations, yet Soutine was nevertheless bound by the model—the portraits maintain a likeness.

Soutine's portraiture, like Kokoschka's, comes out of Van Gogh's new conception of portrait painting, described earlier in this booklet. Soutine, in portraits of the Twenties, extended the Van Gogh conception in various ways: by making extreme deformations of the face and body (thus elevating idiosyncracy of physiognomy, recognized by Van Gogh, into the essence of characterization): by employing multiple, bright color schemes; by—above all—transforming flesh and clothing into a pigment-skin possessed of an uncanny living quality. Soutine's attraction to human flesh in the portraits carries over to fascination with costume—virtually all his Twenties portraits are of uniformed figures: valets, pastry cooks, choirboys. The fabric of the costume—flat, and unvarying in texture and color—becomes a vibrant physical substance, itself like flesh.

In the Twenties, contemporaneous with the costumed portraits, Soutine painted the famous series of still lifes. Like the portraits these are most often concerned with the substance of flesh—but this time the dead flesh of animals. In these still lifes, monumental sides of beef are stretched on the rack, their insides exposed, the inner substance of their life studied and painted with great gusto and great care. In others, pheasants, turkeys and other fowl hang by the neck, their plumage torn off, their flesh revealed. The matter, the texture, the color of flesh is Soutine's singular and crucial passion. *Substance*, whether of animal or man, fascinated Soutine as the one real and basic thing, the irreducible component of all life.

Soutine was born in Lithuania in 1893 and came to Paris when he was twenty. In 1919 he went to Céret, in the French Pyrenees, and worked there for three years. At Céret, on his own, he quickly developed an original and remarkable style. The turbulent and savage *Hill at Céret* typifies this Céret style. After leaving Céret in 1922, Soutine lived in Cagnes and then Paris, where he mainly worked until 1940. As a Jew, Soutine was forced to flee Paris under the German Occupation. He died in 1943.

Soutine did not maintain the fierce intensity of Céret paintings, but until the late Twenties his work remained expressionistic and highly charged. A milder and more lyrical spirit then becomes apparent. At this time Soutine denounced his own Céret pictures and took much pleasure in destroying all those he could get his hands on. Nevertheless, these are highly prized works today, both for art-historical and aesthetic reasons.

Soutine's Céret paintings stand midway between Van Gogh's and de Kooning's in the evolution of modern expressionism. The *Hill at Céret* may be compared with Van Gogh's *Mountains at Saint-Rémy*, reproduced and discussed earlier. In the following essay, de Kooning's *Composition* will be considered in relation to these paintings.

Soutine's hill is like the immense mountain at the right in Van Gogh's painting. In both pictures the mountain is presented as an expansive triangular mass completely spread out at the base and capped by a small form at the apex (a house in the Soutine). Both mountains are painted in similar tones, grays and blue-greens predominating. The forms in both mountains become larger toward the bottom and appear to descend urgently and powerfully.

These are some of the formal and expressive similarities. The difference between them depends on the brushstroke, the single most important "tool" of the expressionist artist. Van Gogh makes vigorous drawn lines which seem to press into canvas. These are clear, unambiguous black lines. They coil, overlap and fuse at times with each other but they always retain their character as lines. Soutine, however, dispenses with the concept of the line as a drawn rhythm. Pigment itself—thick and fluid—evokes energy and motion. Viscous patches, liquid strokes of pigment, applied by a sensitive but emphatic touch, seem to generate life on canvas. Pigment is handled as both a material and a vehicle of color (as the varying densities produce varying tones). The thick pigment, further, points up the greater importance of the picture itself, rather than the image it presents.



**CHAIM SOUTINE**

HILL AT CÉRET. c. 1921. Oil on canvas, 29 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 21 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".

Lent by Perls Galleries, New York.

# DE KOONING

Willem de Kooning was born in Rotterdam in 1904 and emigrated to America in 1926. His first experiments with abstraction date from 1928; they are cerebral and formalistic paintings in which certain motifs, particularly egg shapes and vertical stripes, are deployed with compulsive frequency, albeit with the most sensitive and calculated precision, conscious inventiveness and devotion. Other motifs, derived from everyday life, were introduced over the next few years—a vase, a chair, a table top, windows. These elements comprise virtually the entire repertory of de Kooning's forms. Commonplace items are arranged and painted with gravity and mystery. A certain spatial ambiguity attracts the painter from the outset as well, whereby solid, palpable objects are placed in settings which confuse the relationship of one object to another.

In the Thirties and Forties, de Kooning painted both abstract and figurative works. In a series of black and white pictures of the Forties, de Kooning investigated problems of multiple-meaning forms and the spatial concerns with which they are inextricably connected. Organic shapes are fragmented and fused to calligraphic elements and ordinary relationships of figure to ground are destroyed in favor of a new unity. Then, there are figure drawings executed with the most elegant nuances. There are haunting and melancholic paintings of seated working-men, crisply and energetically painted, conceived with a formal breadth and expansiveness that magically co-exists with de Kooning's search for the evanescent nuance, the subtle pressure of one form against another. The male figures themselves are usually dismembered—anatomical parts are cut off or missing. Other parts of the figure are actually related more to the background (by virtue of their tone and surface quality) than to the totality of the figure. These

male figures, who by pose and facial expression are possessed of a spiritual disenchantment, appear to be struggling into existence. On the other hand, when de Kooning paints female figures there is no doubt about their tangible reality and compelling presence. From the earliest entrance into de Kooning's art of the female figure, in the early Forties, women are depicted as real and complete. Woman is handled with a unity of style, whereby all her parts share a similar aggressive deformation, unlike Man who is not only divided anatomically but also by a stylistic bifurcation; certain portions of the male figure are conceived realistically while other parts are rendered in an almost abstract fashion.

*Woman I* was the product of a two-year assault upon the canvas. In 1950 the artist first drew a woman's figure on canvas, then pasted a cut-out of a lipstick smile from a magazine upon it. Later, de Kooning would cut out anatomical sections from his own preparatory drawings and try them in all sorts of positions, pasting them on canvas, and then continuing to paint. Constantly de Kooning tried to complete the entire work at one go. Painting with furious speed on this over life-size canvas, he tried to keep any portion of the field from drying until the entire surface was finished. Painting "wet on wet" in this way de Kooning strove for the quality of a living skin, a stretched membranous surface which would be charged throughout with vital energies. The painting was constantly scraped and re-scraped, until a final attack on the canvas in 1952 brought off the desired unity. The finished painting reveals this process of protracted violence, a process inextricably tied to the expressiveness of the work. This process of painting characterizes *Composition* of 1955, reproduced opposite the following page. *Composition* contains formal references to the imagery of *Woman*: at the upper right two yellow shapes recall the breasts, and a red area beneath them recalls the female torso. of the earlier work. Other forms in the painting also bring to mind the recurrent use of certain similar elemental shapes in de Kooning's development. These shapes often vary in meaning according to the varying context in which they appear: a breast-shape in one picture may suggest an eye in another.

In spite of the fact that certain forms emerge through the paint maelstrom, the salient impression in *Composition* is

of a formless painting—a painting in which the sense of identity and structure ordinarily granted to shapes has been denied them. Consequently, the relationship of figure to ground is also eliminated in favor of creating an immense—almost seven foot high—flat sheet of energy. Instead of putting forms down, de Kooning manipulates the surface with loaded gestural marks. No rest is permitted the eye by this fluid, ever-changing surface.

Like many de Koonings of the Fifties, *Composition* derives from Van Gogh's landscape images of upheaval and struggle. Soutine's extension of the landscape conception—by heightening the turbulence and emphasizing the material of paint—is, however, closer to de Kooning's intention. As described in the preceding essay, Soutine retained a certain form-making goal and also retained a perceivable image, but he substituted fleshy brushwork for Van Gogh's passionate drawing and thereby weakened the integrity of individual forms. De Kooning goes further by reducing the significance of forms as separately felt things and, instead, heightening the pure expressive powers of pigment, and the singular impact of the total canvas. Soutine was still concerned with a centralized image: de Kooning tends to destroy the centralizing aspect, whether the picture is figurative or not, by painting "all over" the canvas, by imparting equal intensities throughout. Thus, while one feels in a Soutine Céret painting a single emotional confrontation between artist and canvas, one feels in a de Kooning such as *Composition* the aspect of protracted collision.

Finally, it should be noted that at Céret, Soutine's color was murky and dark: fewer color decisions had to be made during the painting act, and this facilitated Soutine's concentration on vehement stroking. De Kooning, on the contrary, chooses brilliant and contrasting colors. Thus, every motion of the brush on canvas must take into account the tonal combinations it provokes. In this dazzling and daring improvisational manner of painting the artist is indeed like the actor cited by Van Gogh, who has to keep a thousand things in mind and keep going all the while. While Van Gogh, however, insisted that the image must be "calculated a long time in advance" of painting, de Kooning insists, one may say, that the actor throw away the script and find his way as he goes.



**WILLEM DE KOONING**

COMPOSITION. 1955. Oil on canvas,  $79\frac{1}{8} \times 69\frac{1}{8}$ ".

Collection The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

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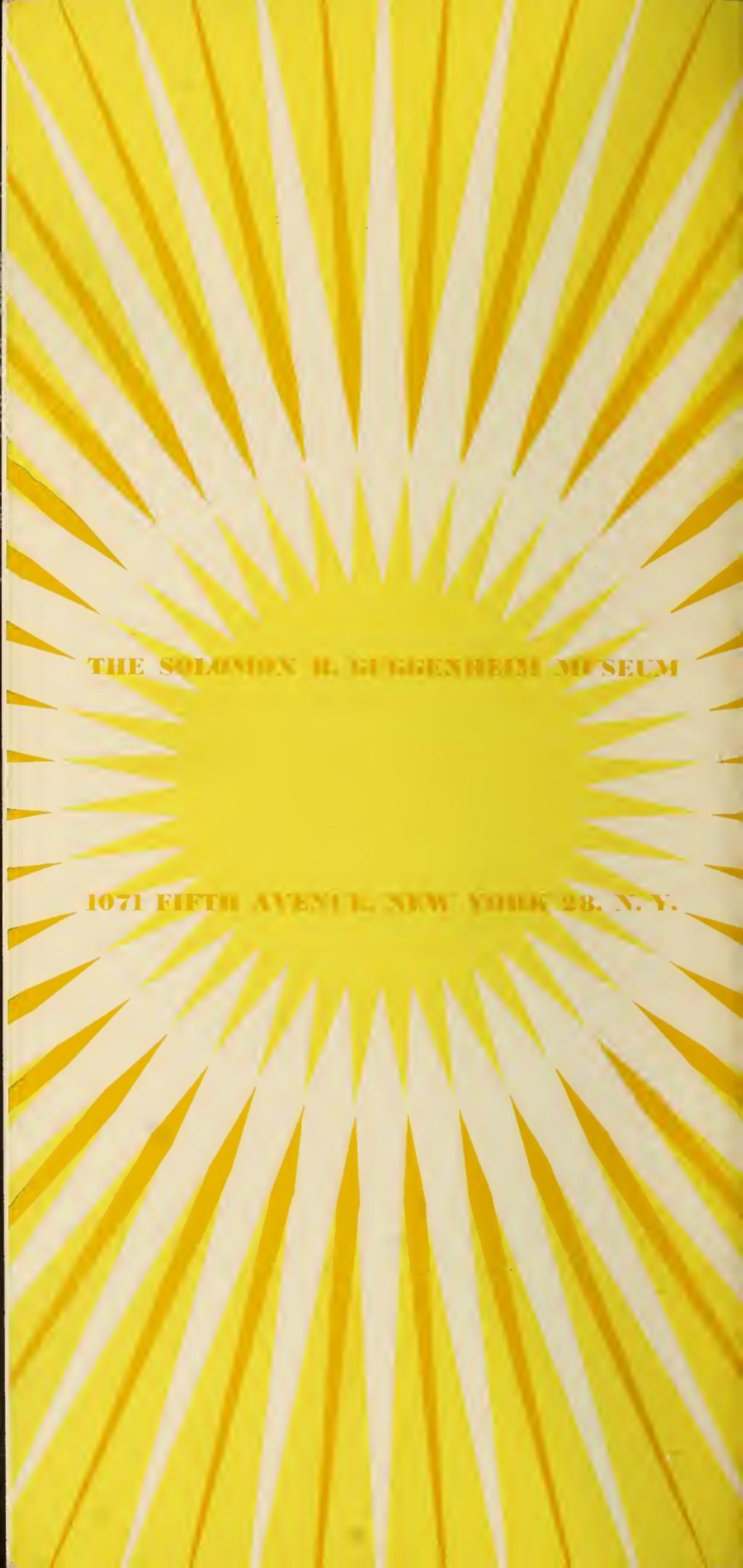
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